

Advocating for justice

Barbados' fisherfolk build capacity to advocate for climate, blue and social justice

By **Maria Pena** (maria.pena@cavehill.uwi.edu), Project Officer, CERMES, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, **Patrick McConney** (patrick.mcconney@cavehill.uwi.edu), CERMES, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, **Tonya Babb, Michelle Barrow, Shevon Bourne, Sheena Griffith, Margaret Harding, Bertha Simmons, Ingrid Taylor** and **Sylvia White** are affiliated with Voices From The Shore Theatre Collective, Barbados

“Who is listening? When will they hear us, see us, listen to us, value our input and respect our opinions? Who will support us? We feed the country!” These were some of the sentiments expressed by women fisherfolk in Barbados on 20 Feb 2024 – the World Day of Social Justice.

Fisherfolk in Barbados today experience growing marginalization. They are increasingly frustrated by the injustices they face from every quarter: their peers, the management authorities at fish landing sites and markets, national government policies and practices, as well as the general public. But what actions are they prepared to take, or capable of taking, and what will enable them to assert their right to justice? The low capacity and lack of empowerment of fisherfolk to respond to, or resist injustices, makes them uneasy. An initiative to build capacity in advocacy and interventions for social justice, blue justice and climate justice is necessary. The Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (CERMES), at the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus in Barbados, is working with fisherfolk in Barbados to address these needs.

For decades, CERMES has focused on Caribbean small-scale fisheries (SSF). Recent sub-regional projects on topics such as stewardship, gender, youth, policy influence, intersectoral coordination, governance, leadership, and organisational capacity highlighted a need to pay more attention to climate justice, blue justice and social justice in small-scale fisheries. This is urgent and critical given the increasing rates of change in both social and ecological systems as a result of climate change and other factors impacting Small Island Developing States (SIDS). In response, CERMES co-developed a project on Amplifying Climate Justice for Fisherfolk in the Barbados Blue Economy (Just BE Fisherfolk) that is funded by the Open Societies Foundation (OSF). Just BE Fisherfolk aims in two years to build capacity among fisherfolk in Barbados as advocates and policy influencers, especially women and young people, for a proactive climate justice approach through empowerment in the context of climate change adaptation in Barbados blue economy initiatives.

Since social justice, climate justice and blue justice do not have a universal global

definition recognized by fisher communities, CERMES is determining how the terms are to be understood and used by local fisherfolk to frame associated injustices. As elsewhere, social justice incorporates the core values of equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal treatment. According to the United Nations, social justice aims for an inclusive, equitable and integrated society, concerned with how to allocate resources fairly. In Barbados, fisherfolk identify gender mainstreaming as an example of social justice. They also appreciate that an urgent global justice concern is that those who suffer most from climate change have done the least to cause it. Fisherfolk already attribute changes in the ocean environment to climate-related factors, the most conspicuous and serious being the massive influxes of sargassum seaweed since 2011. Barbados has had a ministry responsible for blue economy since 2018 with many policy initiatives, but blue justice is seldom mentioned. Fisherfolk in Barbados understand the concept, given their constant competition with other economic sectors for coastal and marine goods and services in sustainable development. Blue justice addresses how small-scale fisheries are affected by blue economy initiatives and, according to theorists, it is the ‘moral compass’ to the blue economy. These relational concepts recognize the realities of human dependency and address human vulnerability. One of the aims of Just BE Fisherfolk is to determine more deeply how applicable these concepts are to the practices and experiences of fisherfolk in Barbados.

Just BE Fisherfolk group sessions have provided fisherfolk with opportunities to share the injustices they experience. It is apparent to them that all injustices - social, blue and climate - are deeply intertwined at all levels in the fisheries. State-run landing sites are sites of power dynamics. In some cases, all parties are women or all are men, so gender is not a clear factor. Some injustices seem to be passed down an economic hierarchy of occupations, in which fisherfolk form the base and hence are most vulnerable. There may be well-known fisheries management solutions to some of the perceived injustices, but most fisherfolk are not exposed to or engaged in fisheries management. In other cases, injustices arise from policies and practices estimated to contribute more to



Visit to Bridgetown Fisheries Complex to talk about climate justice, Barbados. A new approach to fisherfolk advocacy and empowerment in Barbados is the use of Popular Theatre to communicate problems and possible solutions or trade-offs to be considered in decisions

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the national economy, introducing questions about distributive justice and societal wellbeing. Fisherfolk do not yet categorize and analyze injustices in ways that facilitate devising more just circumstances. A role of Just BE Fisherfolk is therefore to help fisherfolk leaders develop intersectoral and global perspectives in small-scale fisheries. This is not by workshops and other trainings, but by social media communications, landing site “drop-by” visits and other means of convenient interaction.

Of the three types of justice focused upon by this project, blue justice has the potential to become the most significant advocacy and intervention issue for fisherfolk in Barbados, incorporating climate and social justice. Fisherfolk in Barbados are becoming aware of its importance in ongoing national blue economy activities, such as the national ocean policy and marine spatial plan (MSP) processes, coastal zone policy and plan, tourism development, marine renewable energy, and draft legislation covering coastal, fisheries and other sectors. Just BE Fisherfolk aims to ensure that fisherfolk are included in Barbados blue economy processes. Recently fisherfolk were represented by a Just BE fisherfolk core group at a consultation on the draft Barbados national ocean policy. This

provided them with the chance to understand the rationale for the development of the policy and contribute to the section on the fisheries sector.

Advocacy is needed but few fisherfolk can afford to challenge state workers, institutions, and processes, whether because of earnings lost when participating in events, or opportunities denied in terms of retaliatory action. Many fisherfolk, both men and women, young and old, have come to accept and live with the injustices they perceive, creatively finding ways to work around and adapt to them rather than resolve them. Just BE Fisherfolk promotes networking and collective action to strongly support fisherfolk leaders developing clearly defined strategies within a social justice movement aimed at bringing forth change. Weak fisherfolk organizations with governance deficiencies and lack of cohesion perpetuate the muting of fisherfolk voices, agency and advocacy. Fisherfolk have identified the need to come together and have a common voice to bring about changes. That is, to propose informed solutions rather than just make complaints. The fishing industry is viewed as their opportunity to be their own bosses with the assurance of being able to provide for their families, and especially

the youth in fisherfolk households. They do not wish to leave behind their fisheries livelihoods but instead want to create a positive working environment. Cohesive groups with strong leaders can promote their interests and enhance their responses to planned and implemented initiatives. The project has a fisherfolk engagement group to guide it. Fisherfolk leading and engaged in justice movements can ensure that potentially inequitable or negative outcomes of national initiatives and projects on social protection, blue economy development, climate change adaptation and resilience building are limited or avoided.

A new approach to fisherfolk advocacy and empowerment in Barbados is the use of Popular Theatre to communicate problems and possible solutions or trade-offs to be considered in decisions. This technique for participatory action research makes use of individual and community participation to highlight social issues and promote transformation. The approach integrates entertainment - singing, dancing, storytelling, poetry, role-playing games and other cultural forms - with the examination of issues and attitudes, knowledge sharing, and ultimately initiating action for positive social change. This is the first time Popular Theatre is being applied in Barbados to the fishing industry. A core group of women small-scale processors who call themselves The Voices from The Shore Theatre Collective are building their capacity in Popular Theatre to perform for or with audiences including their peers, government officials, donors, academia, journalists, the general public and others to advocate for small-scale fisherfolk rights. The Just BE Fisherfolk project provides the opportunity for further capacity building and development of this group to create a foundation for justice advocacy outside more conventional information channels. The group and its participation techniques are important to Just BE Fisherfolk project activities. Fisherfolk are familiar with and respect the group's members, most of whom are women small-scale fish processors and members of fisherfolk organizations, and seem keen to engage with them in discussions about injustices in spaces where they are most comfortable and with people they trust. This is important to gaining a thorough understanding of local perspectives on justice in SSF.

Fisherfolk are responding well to Popular Theatre. The core group has grown in size and now includes youth who join their mothers and grandmothers at capacity building sessions. Just BE Fisherfolk has a focus on youth in fisheries and aims to engage schools and young



Who Feels it Knows it highlights various issues directly impacting female fisherfolk in Barbados but with significant relevance to multiple stakeholders in the industry (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhmQZwKQkIM>)

environmentalists in the project as justice allies of fisherfolk. One school with students who are interested in the fishing industry, its occupations and practices, has indicated interest in joining the project and will be engaged over the next few months. Youth environmental networks are being recruited to build a youth for fisheries justice action group that can help bring attention to the injustices in small-scale fisheries, particularly regarding new, young people in the industry.

Just BE Fisherfolk is being noticed regionally and globally. It is taking advantage of opportunities and using different mediums to share perspectives on justice in small-scale fisheries. The Voices from the Shore Theatre Collective participated in a Caribbean Climate Justice Camp, 28 - 31 March 2024, Sint Maarten, during which the group facilitated a session on their approach to understanding justice in small-scale fisheries and shared their creative products with more than 120 climate justice activists from more than 25 Caribbean islands. Mainstream social media including TikTok, Instagram and YouTube videos are being used to share project ideas and findings by fisherfolk and for them. Locally a project WhatsApp group is growing in membership and fisherfolk are starting to communicate among themselves about justice issues in small-scale fisheries in Barbados and regionally.

There is much to be done to bring about justice in SSF and fisherfolk must take the lead to assert their rights supported by projects and initiatives like Just BE Fisherfolk. 🗣️

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